

ON DEATH, DYING, AND THE FUTURE HOPE

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Rebellion in a Perfect Universe

The attempts to understand the mysterious origin and existence of evil have generated endless discussions and many speculative theories. For the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), “the question of the origin of evil, second to that of existence itself, is the greatest enigma of life and the heaviest cross for the intellect to bear.”¹ This thought was echoed in 1916 by the Baptist minister W. P. Wilks when he stated that for the questions surrounding the origin and existence of evil, “We find as many different answers as there are systems of thought.”² This means that people assess this issue, as they do with any subject, from the perspective of their own ideological framework.

In this chapter, we will review a few of the common philosophical speculations about the origin of evil and then consider what the Bible says about the nature of God and the mysterious origin and endurance of evil. These discussions will provide the foundation for assessing the biblical teachings about life, death, and everlasting life.

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Philosophical speculations

There are many philosophical speculations about the origin of evil. Some people deny the very existence of evil by considering it to be a mere illusion. Others assume that both God and matter are coeternal, and consequently, if God is good, then matter must be evil. There are those who are not afraid of portraying God as being in Himself both good and evil, or at least as having some demonic attributes.³ In his *Ecce Homo* (1888), the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche satirized the biblical Creation-Fall account (Genesis 1–3) as follows: “It was God himself who at the end of his day’s work lay down as a serpent under the tree of knowledge: thus he rested from being God. . . . The devil is merely God’s idleness on that seventh day.”⁴

Many people are careful enough to separate evil from God but still make Him responsible for its existence, as postulated by the popular Epicurean syllogism:

Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then He is not omnipotent.

Is He able but not willing? Then He is malevolent.

Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call Him God?⁵

These questions are easily asked but difficult to answer. On one side, the Calvinist Reformed tradition tries to close the discussion by claiming that God, by His sovereignty, ordained from all eternity whatsoever would come to pass. In this line, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) denies that God is the author of sin and that He violates the will of His creatures, but at the same time, it affirms that “by the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death” and that the number of each group “cannot

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be either increased or diminished.”⁶ As one can easily perceive, this theory makes God responsible for the impenitent sinners who follow their evil path. In this case, even the final judgment by works (Revelation 20:11–13) would be senseless, for God would be judging only the actions that He preordained.

On the other side, so-called process theology tries to exonerate God from the problem of evil by proposing that He does not fully foreknow the free choices of His creatures but only their possibilities. So, from this perspective, God cannot be made responsible for the existence of evil because He did not foresee the origin of evil but only faced the risk of evil by granting free will to His creatures. This theory tries to absolve God from the origin of evil but denies His omniscience and, consequently, undermines some of His other attributes.

Several other theories could be mentioned, but these are sufficient to demonstrate that human reason by itself, as logical as it may seem, cannot properly explain the nature of God and the mysterious origin of evil. Indeed, we need to move away from the quicksand of human speculation to the solid platform of God’s Word. Only God—who was there when evil emerged—can accurately explain it to us in our fallen condition (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29; John 16:12, 13).

God’s unconditional love

The self-revelation of God in Scripture rules out any possibility of Him being responsible for the origin and existence of evil. Of His own nature, we are told that God is holy (Isaiah 6:3; 1 Peter 1:15, 16), He is good (Psalm 100:5; Luke 18:19), and He “cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone” (James 1:13). If any evil would come from God, as proposed by some philosophers, then we could not trust Him. But with King David, we can pray with full confidence: “I will fear no evil; for You are with me” (Psalm 23:4).

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The whole Bible portrays an ongoing cosmic-historical controversy between God and good on one side and Satan and evil on the other side. This struggle is more than evident, for instance, in the story of Job (Job 1:1–12), in the case of Joshua the high priest (Zechariah 3:1–5), and in the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). To claim that God is the source of evil means to negate the reality of this controversy and contradict the biblical teachings about the contrasting natures of God and of evil. No wonder that Christ could affirm emphatically at the end of His earthly ministry, “The ruler of this world [Satan] is coming, and he has nothing in Me” (John 14:30).

But one could still ask, Was God taken by surprise with the appearance of evil? Not at all! The Bible affirms that God is “perfect in knowledge” (Job 37:16) and “knows all things” (1 John 3:20), even “the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done” (Isaiah 46:10). In addition, God is also all-powerful (Jeremiah 32:17; Revelation 19:6). Yet we should never forget that while God’s foreknowledge is absolute, it is also noncausative. This means that it is not because God knows the future that it will happen, but because it will happen, God already knows it. So if God is all-powerful and even knew that Lucifer and one-third of the heavenly angels would eventually rebel (Revelation 12:4), why did He create them in the first place?

In trying to answer this question, we must recognize that we are dealing with a mystery that goes beyond our cognitive abilities. Even so, there are some basic concepts that we should consider. First, God is love, and love does not exist in isolation; it needs to be expressed to others who can respond to it (1 John 4:7–10, 16). Such a response can only come from receptive beings created with free will. While free will leaves the relationship open to the possibility of disloyalty, love is always willing

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to face that risk. Second, God's love is unconditional, impartial, and completely free from favoritism, being extended even to His own enemies (Matthew 5:44, 45; Romans 5:6–11). And third, God's unconditional love conceived of a salvation plan far more effective than the problem of evil itself, for "where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Romans 5:20). So God's unrestrainable love superseded all risks from granting free will to His responsive creatures.

Lucifer's mysterious selfishness

The mysterious and motiveless origin of evil cannot be explained properly. The problem is not so much with the limited revelation on this matter or with our deficient understanding of that revelation but rather with the illogical and senseless nature of evil. As pointed out by G. C. Berkouwer, "A logical explanation [of sin] assigns a sensibleness to that which is intrinsically nonsensical, a rationality to that which is irrational, and a certain order to that which is disorderly."⁷ After all, we cannot explain the unexplainable. But even without understanding the *why* of evil, we have helpful information on the *how* and with *whom* it actually began.

Three crucial Bible passages shed light on the mysterious origin of evil. One is Ezekiel 28, in which the earthly king of Tyre, who was only a man but considered himself a god (verses 2, 6, 9), becomes a symbol of the much-honored heavenly cherub Lucifer (verses 12–17). The text explains that God created Lucifer "full of wisdom and perfect in beauty" (verse 12; cf. verse 15), placed him in the Garden of Eden (verse 13), and anointed him as a "covering cherub" to be on the holy "mountain of God" (verses 14, 16). But mysteriously, this honored cherub lifted up his heart because of his beauty and corrupted his wisdom for the sake of his splendor (verse 17). Consequently, God had to cast him to the ground (verse 17).

Another helpful passage is Isaiah 14, in which the king of

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Babylon (evidently Nebuchadnezzar) becomes a symbol of the proud “Lucifer, son of the morning” (verse 12; cf. verses 12–15). In this passage, Lucifer is described as having nurtured the desires of exalting his throne above the heavenly hosts (verse 13) and of being “like the Most High” (verse 14). Due to his debauching and contagious selfishness, he was cast out of heaven and “cut down to the ground” (verse 12).

A third crucial passage is Revelation 12, which reveals the proportions and enduring consequences of Lucifer’s rebellion that began in heaven. In unambiguous terms, the text declares that the rebellion was caused by “the great dragon . . . , that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan” (verse 9); a real “war broke out in heaven” between “Michael and his angels” on one side, and “the dragon and his angels” on the other side (verse 7); one-third of the heavenly angels followed the dragon (verse 4); and the evil hosts did not prevail and were cast out from heaven to the earth (verses 8, 9). After Satan and his followers were expelled from heaven, “not a taint of rebellion was left in heaven. All was again peaceful and harmonious as before.”⁸

It is worth noting that Jesus spoke of three major banishments of Satan. The first was Satan’s expulsion from heaven: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). The second took place at the cross when Satan lost his legal right over this world: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31; cf. Revelation 12:10). And the third one will be his final destruction in “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). But one may still wonder why God did not destroy Satan after his initial rebellion in heaven.

The endurance of evil

The Bible speaks of Satan as “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44, NIV) and “the accuser of our brethren” (Revelation 12:10).

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This is evident in the case of Joshua the high priest when Satan accused him before God of being unworthy (Zechariah 3:1–5). But in the story of Job, Satan accused God of showing favoritism to that prosperous patriarch (Job 1:1–12). In the book of Revelation, God’s end-time remnant people become the special object of Satan’s wrath for the simple reason that they “keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17). These passages confirm the reality that God and His followers are the special targets of Satan’s charges and attacks.

When Satan accused God of having a preferential relationship with Job, God allowed enough time for the patriarch to disclaim those charges through his own life. But at the macro-cosmic level, much more time is needed in human history for God to fully demonstrate the transforming power of His grace and for Satan to fully disclose the real nature of evil. Ellen White explains,

Had he [Satan] been immediately blotted from existence, they [the inhabitants of heaven and other worlds] would have served God from fear rather than from love. The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. Evil must be permitted to come to maturity. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages Satan must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might forever be placed beyond all question.⁹

If evil was coeternal with God—without a beginning—as some people claim, then it would never cease to exist. In that case, we would have to admit that evil is so powerful that not

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even God could destroy it. But praise the Lord, we are assured that evil had a beginning, and consequently, it will also have an end. Christ's victory on the cross of Calvary is the guarantee that the time will come when sin and evil will no longer exist and everything will be perfect again.

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 53.

2. W. P. Wilks, "The Origin of Evil," *Review & Expositor* 13, no. 3 (July 1916): 372. See also Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., eds., *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

3. Paul Volz, *Das Dämonische in Jobwe*, Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge und Schriften aus dem Gebiet der Theologie und Religionsgeschichte 110 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924).

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is, and The Anti-christ: A Curse on Christianity*, trans. Thomas Wayne (New York: Algora, 2004), 80.

5. This is a popular paraphrase of Epicurus's (341–270 BC) classic syllogism and is adapted from Lactantius, *On the Anger of God*, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 22, *The Works of Lactantius* 2, trans. William Fletcher (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871), 28.

6. Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 3, in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie R. Hotchkiss (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:610, 611.

7. G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 18.

8. Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2002), 19.

9. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 498.